DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 172 248 CS 204 909

AUTHOR Abrahamson, Richard F.; Berry, Marrien
TITLE Visual Literacy and Adolescent Novels--The Reading Connection.
PUB DATE [79]
NOTE 11p.; Guide prepared at the University of Houston

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescent Literature; Critical Reading; Critical Thinking; English Curriculum; *English Instruction; Film Production; *Films; Film Study; *Literary Analysis; Literature Appreciation; *Novels; Production Techniques; Secondary Education; Television Viewing; *Visual Literacy
IDENTIFIERS *Zindel (Paul)

ABSTRACT

Visual literacy--an increasingly important skill that has lately been added to the wide range of skills that reading/English teachers are expected to teach--can be coupled with lessons in literary appreciation through the medium of the adolescent novel. Since students participate in a great deal of television viewing, it is as important for them to learn critical viewing skills as it is for them to learn critical reading skills. Teachers can mesh lessons in literary appreciation and visual literacy through examining how authors create characters, actions, and descriptions. As has been illustrated by author Richard Peck, students can examine adolescent novels in the light of considerations that might be made in filming them. In novels such as those of Paul Zindel, chapters can be analyzed in terms of camera shots, images, and scenes. Filmed versions of novels can be compared with students' prior envisioning of filmed versions of those books. Teachers can also help students to explore the film technique of montage and to consider such topics as the cinematic qualities of the dialogue and opening scenes of Zindel's novels. (GT)

Richard F. Abrahamson
Merrian Perry



# Visual Literacy and Adolescent Novels -- The Reading Connection

The task of a reading or English teacher in today's junior and senior high schools is an easy one. The reading teacher or English teacher (who is often times one in the same) is charged with creating enthusiastic, lifetime readers who are capable of detecting main ideas, comprehending all that is read, articulating that understanding with perfect diction and poise and/or perfect penmanship and prose, all of this while alluding to various great works of the English language in the process. Once all this is accomplished, the teacher of adolescents had better not sit back with an air of contentment and a feeling of a job well done because other mandatory tasks await. There's the obligatory unit on career education, and values clarification, and sexism/sereotyping, as well as the mass media unit. For many teachers, especially during the early 1970's, the media unit included a stab at creating visually literate students as well as literate students capable of all the tasks mentioned above.

The concept of visual literacy is back (or has hung on) in the late 1970's and as newspaper headlines berate teachers for deviating from whatever basic is en vogue that week, many articles are pointing an accusing finger at the schools for not creating students who are visually literate. In Dan Rather's speech at the 1978 IRA convention in Houston, he suggested that teachers do help youngsters to become educated consumers of print but not of media. In a recent interview, Rather proposed that visual literacy "be added to the list of the four traditional language arts, beginning in kindergarten or before" (Dillon 1979, p. 566). It is interesting that in one article after another, when critics of education argue for schools to create students who are visually literate, invariably that responsibility (in both the articles and in actual practice) falls to the reading/English teacher.

In most schools, teachers have ignored any real attempt to create visually literate students simply because there's not enough time in the day. There are context clues, prepositions, spelling, literary appreciation and unless visual literacy can somehow be coupled with these time consuming tasks, it gets shelved. This article is an attempt to show that visual literacy is of increasing importance and that one can couple visual literacy training with lessons in literary appreciation. The connection that makes this possible is teenagers and adolescent fiction.

To the first point -- the importance of visual literacy. We are a media saturated society. Daily we are bombarded with visual stimuli that vary from highway billboards to Laverne and Shirley. The figures on television viewing are well known. By the time a youngster leaves high school, he will have spent 22,000 hours in front of the television and only about 11,000 hours in school (Larrick 1975). Some students who leave high school will never read an entire book again and yet they'll log hundreds more hours of television viewing, billboard viewing and a host of other types of viewing. Perhaps the ability to be a discriminating viewer ought to be a high school exit requirement of equal importance to filling out income tax forms or job applications. The National Conference on Visual Literacy has put together this definition of the concept.

> Visual literacy refers to a group of vision-competencies a human being can develop by seeing and at the same time having and integrating other sensory experiences. The development of these competencies is fundamental to normal human learning. When developed, they enable a visually literate person to discriminate and interpret the visible actions, objects, and symbols natural or man-made, that he encounters in his environment. Through the creative use of these competencies, he is able to communicate with others. Through the appreciative use of the competencies, he is able to comprehend and enjoy the masterworks of visual communications. (Fransecky and Ferguson 1973, p. 45)

This definition points to a very big difference in the viewing habits

of many teens and adults as well. If we use television as our example, how many of us have "watched" for hours and when the set is turned off have no idea what we saw? This is the addiction quality of TV viewing that Marie Winn fears so much in The Plug In Drug (1978). The visually literate person, by contrast, would be aware of camera techniques, time shifts, visual persuasion techniques and, in general, would participate in the viewing experience as an active viewer capable of a final critical reaction. Critical viewing is as important as critical reading in a democratic society.

There is a similarity between the visually literate person described above and the discriminating reader -- the reader who can recognize an author's use of literary devices, his style, his method of persuasion, his use of flashback. Teachers of literature are always concerned with creating students who enjoy reading but who are also sensitive to the writer's craft, that is, how he does what he does in creating images and eliciting particular emotions. It is in this area of how the author creates his characters, actions, and descriptions that we can mesh lessons in literary appreciation with lessons in visual literacy.

Many of today's most popular creators of adolescent literature are very aware of the impact television and film viewing has on their reading audience. One such writer is Richard Peck. In a recent article, he suggested ten questions that teachers should ask their students about an adolescent novel. Three of the ten deal with media and have the effect of getting students to consider film, television, and the novel critically. In each case, note Peck's "Ulterior Motive" for asking these questions.

> (1) If you were to film this story, what characters would you eliminate if you couldn't use them all? (Ulterior Motive): to contrast the human richness of a novel with the necessary simplification of a TV show. Confronted with the need to eliminate some of the characters who add texture, some readers may rise up in defense of their favorites.

> (2) Would you film this story in black and white or in color? (Ulterior Motive): to consider tone. The initial reaction in this floral age is to opt for color in everything. But some readers may remember the most chilling Dracula films are in black and white, perhaps in part because dark shadows are always darkest and black blood is more menacing than red.
>
> (3) Why or why not would this story make a good TV series? (Ulterior Motive): to contrast the shaping of a book's sequential chapters in the larger shape of the plot to the episodes of a TV series that repeat narrowly but don't rise from their formula to a central conclusion. (Peck 1978, p. 1)

The student who can answer these questions has taken a first step toward being a reader cognizant of writing techniques and a viewer aware of restrictions that need to be dealt with in a film or a TV show.

When teachers and students begin this careful look at the writing in adolescent novels, they quickly find that many of these writers use film techniques to create their popular books. One of the most interesting writers to deal with is Paul Zindel. Whether or not Zindel consciously uses the techniques of film in his books is not a necessary point to prove but certainly one interesting to ponder. What is important is that in looking for cinematic techniques in adolescent novels, the teen reader begins to see the effect of putting certain words and character actions together and he begins to see how individual snatches of dialogue or action form very vivid total pictures. The time spent looking at novels in this light is also time spent creating a person who will be more aware of camera techniques and other cinematic techniques used to create films. This person will be capable of being an active viewer able to make critical judements about what he watches.

To begin the hunt for cinematic techniques in adolescent novels like Zindel's, it helps to give students a short lesson in the terms and techniques used in making a film. A film is actually a compilation of frames, just as language is a compilation of phonemes and graphemes. Frames put together comprise a shot, "which is recorded by a single operation of the camera from the

time the camera starts to the time it stops" (Dick 1978, p. 12). A shot is often loosely equated with a sentence. A scene is a series of shots, or somewhat like a paragraph. The largest unit, roughly like a chapter, is the sequence, defined as "a structural unit of film using time, location or some pattern to link together a number of scenes" (Harrington 1973, p. 19). A cut is one shot, or more accurately, the transition between shots. Shots are edited to become scenes, then sequences, and finally the movie the viewer sees in the theater.

It seems more than conincidence that so many of Zindel's chapters read like sequences, though sometimes so compressed, like scenes. The opening chapter of My Darling, My Hamburger (1971) is a vivid example of a scene labelled a chapter. The opening follows Maggie and Liz into the high school auditorium, cut to Liz unwrapping her gum, cut to stage and Pierre walking on stage, and so forth. A technique to avoid excessive camera cuts is the voice over. The camera might be pointed on stage at the advisor and Pierre, while the viewer hears the girl's voices in the hilarious dialogue between Liz and Maggie (p. 4). As the whole first chapter takes place in the auditorium, these shots would be a scene encompassing the entire chapter. More generally, however, scenes shift two or three times within a chapter, as seen in The Pigman (1978) when John, Lorraine and the Pigman ride a bus to Beekman's, pass the old woman talking to herself about death, go into the department store, through several departments, and then in the climax of the sequence, skate through the store. Each location seems a scene here, and the several scenes comprise a sequence, or chapter.

Shots may be of different range, extreme close up, close up, medium, and long or extreme long shots. The camera may be stationary or moving. Stationary shots are "tilted" high or low on a vertical rotation or horizontally for a pan. The moving camera most often tracks, or goes with the character.

Either stationary or moving camera may employ zoom or freeze techniques, effected with adjustment of the lenses. Subjective camera is the camera tracking with the character, seeing what he sees. If a student internalizes these terms, develops as a "cinematic reader", he might "read" the following excerpt from Zindel's Pardon Me, You're Stepping on My Eyeball (1977) in this way:

> Subjective camera, tracking
>
> Edna gets off bus, walks to the Potts' mansion. Sees the house, four stories high, glass predominate, out on the top of the hill.
>
> CUT to inside: Jacqueline on phone and waving to Edna to look around.
>
> CUT to subjective camera panning outside. Swimming pool steaming like a lobster pot, next to it Rivera whirlpool
>
> CUT to pan of inside, first floor--long short of kitchen and dining area as whole
>
> CUT to medium shot of kitchen only, then appliances in close up
>
> CUT to pan of 2nd floor living room
>
> CUT TO CLOSE UP of oil painting of nude young boy who looked like he lived in the 18th century and had a lot of problems
>
> CUT TO medium range inside to out, sliding doors and terrace, stairway leading to pool below and lawn
>
> CUT TO 3rd floor, panning of rooms, close-up in den of Mr. Pott's professional gear as advertising manager
>
> CUT to fourth floor and master bedroom, medium shots of lavish furnishing
>
> CUT TO deck over swimming pool, then bathroom.
>
> CUT to tracking Edna downstairs to the game room and pan furnishing there
>
> CUT to Edna, close-up of her face, mood is sadness as she realizes one needs someone with whom to share even this opulence. (pp. 140-143)

While admittedly one would not analyze the range, angle or type of shots as he read the novel initially, a "cinematic" reading, even as class exercise,

results in an almost automatic appreciation of how truly visual the novels are and sharply increases sylistic and artistic understanding of them. More importantly, developing this "image," "shot" or "scene" consciousness is almost essential to understanding a primary method Zindel uses to present a great deal of the imagery in the novels. The understanding is also necessary to be able to critcially view any television show or film.

Now that so many adolescent novels are being made into movies, students would certainly benefit from "cinematically" viewing a scene from a book as it might be filmed and then comparing how they envisioned the filming of the written version with the actual movie itself. Working with a scene from John Neufeld's Lisa Bright and Dark (1969), a student could use his cinematic eye to rewrite the scene for film. When students view this scene in the movie, truly visually literate and active viewers will be analyzing how their version differed from the professional's.

Teachers interested in developing students' sensitivity to literary imagery will be interestd in exploring the film technique known as montage. "A montage in film is a rhetorical arrangement of juxtaposed shots. The combination, or gestalt, produces an idea by combining the visual element of two dissimilar images" (Harrington 1973, p. 138). To examine Zindel's imagery, one must distinguish between a literary and filmic metaphor or simile. While a literary simile or metaphor compares two unlike objects almost inevitably within the framework of one sentence, the filmic version juxtaposes two shots, occasionally scenes or even sequences to comment or illuminate the meaning within both. Zindel does use literary imagery, but frequently he uses montage to create unforgettably vivid cinematic imagery. His best examples are in The Pigman. At the beginning of chapter nine (pp. 84-85), John has talked with a whacky friend, Norton. In a flashback, John

remembers drinking as a ten year old, the fatherly encouragement and attention he received when he did so. The "shot" is superceded by a shot of his parents as they are today, the tired father and mother, not fighting anymore, he not drinking, she fanatically fearful of noise or a messy spot in her house. The pace then quickens dramatically as shots race frenetically through a series of closeups, alternating from mother to father.

> 'John, turn your radio down!'
> 'John, you're disturbing the neighbors!'
> 'John, you're disturbing your father!'
> 'John, you're disturbing your mother!'
> 'John, you're disturbing the cat!'
> 'John, don't slam the door when you go out; don't, don't, don't make so much noise on the porch; don't bang your feet when you walk on the stairs; don't walk on the kitchen floor -- don't, don't, don't!' (p. 85)

Then a slow dissolve and flashback to the Pigman saying

> 'John, please do whatever you like. Make yourself comfortable. If you want something out of the refrigerator, help yourself. I want you to feel at home.'
>
> And always a big smile so you knew he meant it. (p. 85)

Conceptualized visually, the emotional impact of the montage is breathtaking. More to the point, it is not a literary image, it is a filmic one. It is shot against shot, image against image.

As students become more sophisticated in this cinematic viewing, more subtle cinematic similarities start to surface. Zindel uses much dialogue that tends to have a minimum of description in it. Movies tend to do this same kind of thing. Further, in film the audience is used to time jumps. A scene ends and we jump to another time or place. Zindel's chapters do this time jumping as well. Specifically, chapter four of Pardon Me, You're Stepping on My Eyeball ends with a conversation between Edna and her mother. Chapter five begins in Mr. Meizner's office as Marsh and the counselor talk.

The entire structure of his novels is ordered in almost identical fashion; it is the single most striking and obvious filmic element in the novels.

There are many similarities between a well made film and a finely crafted novel for adolescents. A well made film "draws a viewer in immediately and provides necessary information later as narrative progresses" (Harrington 1973, p. 113). Harrington continues by pointing out that a film opening is more an emotional premise than a logical or intellectual one. A quick review of five opening chapters of Zindel novels leaves no doubt that that statement could be written about them as well as film. Zindel manages to convey an amazing amount of information in his initial chapters, but the immediate image is so compelling that the information is absorbed almost unconsciously as the reader sees the character burst off the page. The first two pages in Confessions of a Teenage Baboon (1978) establishes locale, age, name of main character, and foreshadows all the horrible things to come. I Never Loved Your Mind (1972) moves even more quickly, as the reader is confronted with Dewey, told he is a seventeen year old high school drop-out, taken to his job interview, and hurled into a medical crisis in one and one-half pages.

The list of film techniques found in adolescent novels is almost endless. The more students look at the writing in adolescent novels, the more cinematic techniques become obvious. Paul Zindel's novels, the Laverne and Shirley television show, and the Star Wars movie all are created utilizing some of the same techniques. The student who can spot these techniques is on his way to a higher degree of literary appreciation and visual awareness. This type of cinematic analysis helps an already overworked teacher tackle two important learning objectives at one time.

References

Dick, Bernard F. Anatomy of a Film. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978.

Dillon, David A. "Factors in the Growth of a Language Craftsman -- Dan Rather." Language Arts (May 1979): 562-568.

Fransecky, Roger B. and Ferguson, Roy. "New Ways of Seeing: The Milford Visual Communications Project." Audiovisual Instruction (April 1973): 44-49.

Harrington, John. The Rhetoric of Film. New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973.

Larrick, Nancy. A Parent's Guide to Children's Reading. New York: Bantam, 1975.

Neufeld, John. Lisa Bright and Dark. Phillips: New York, 1969.

Peck, Richard. "Ten Questions to Ask about a Novel." ALAN Newsletter (Spring 1978): 1 and 7.

Zindel, Paul. Confessions of a Teenage Baboon. New York: Bantam, 1978.

Zindel, Paul. I Never Loved Your Mind. New York: Bantam, 1972.

Zindel, Paul. My Darling, My Hamburger. New York: Bantam, 1971.

Zindel, Paul. Pardon Me, You're Stepping on My Eyeball! New York: Bantam, 1977.

Zindel, Paul. The Pigman. New York: Bantam, 1978.